

Comments on Kaputu's Paper and Presentation

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Professor Felix Kaputu's paper sharply contrasts Japan with Africa in terms of the confrontation with the West. Throughout the process of modernization, Japan succeeds in maintaining the "archetypical and mythological aesthetics," whereas African cultural legacy has been uprooted by European colonization. Japan manages to protect its "strong local, national identity" through the "continuous feeling of control and property ownership." On the contrary, Africa has been totally deprived of such a glorious history due to the devastation of centuries of colonialism. Africa's political leaders as well as European intellectuals are accomplices in the Eurocentric imposition of alien culture (like the Basilica in Ivory Coast).

Such rhetoric of deploying Japan in order to criticize one's own country or culture is not uncommon in the writings of Asian and Western intellectuals. Yet Felix Kaputu seems to me the first African intellectual to do it extensively. Of course, as one question raised after the presentation, "Japan" and "Africa" cannot be compared in a simplistic way (one is an archipelago, while the other a continent). However, the comparison is not his goal but rather a strategy to illuminate the "African" (bantú, Congo, Christian, etc.) culture from an alternative light and vice versa. And one might argue that some naïveté is deliberately needed to highlight the African disruptive (subjugate) modernity, the primary object of essay.

Kaputu's paper teaches me about the book of Placide Tempels on Bantu philosophy (his quotes remind me of Janheinz Jahn's *Muntu*, 1961). It is this Franciscan missionary, according to him, who explains the Bantu religious philosophy in a way that is understandable for outsiders. In other words, it is only through the Catholic grid that the local belief system is coherently explicated. But isn't it a bit ironic to deploy such a stratagem in arguing for the value of "African creativity and originality"? Is he in this regard like Fenollosa, Hearn, or Morse in Japanese modern history?

Now, I want to go beyond the role of discussant to present Kaputu as the only writer in the conference. He published his first novel, *L'ange-gardien inutile* (2009, L'Harmattan, Paris) and is writing the second right now. It is important for our conference to have such a multi-faceted intellectual because we are sometimes bored with the formalism of academic work. He presented an alternative writing in the form of an intellectual essay which illuminates the question of Oriental aesthetics and thinking.

The Useless Guardian-Angel is a story of the professor in Congo (the author's semi-autobiographical double). He receives a call from his adolescent friend who is now the director of the Department of Security.

The protagonist is arrested under the suspicion of illegal importation of arms from Japan, where he visited as fellow scholar. The professor recollects his childhood in a native village and the first encounter with the Belgian priest who baptized him. The church and the dictatorship are completely corrupt politically and morally and the innocent intellectual is imprisoned as a sacrifice. The final paragraph is the same as the first one—as if the nightmare of the professor was endless. The contrast between the happy childhood and the disgusting present is as obvious as the rage against the political injustice and socially embedded corruption. Kaputu explicitly accuses the continuity of colonialism's negative legacy in so-called “postcolonial” Africa. The last sentence of the paper (“its life depends much on uncertain patrons and quite often on irregularities unacceptable on other continents”) or the phrase of Africa's “chaotic evolution” must be read under this political light.

Kaputu's language is often more metaphorical than realist, full of allusion, which is sometimes beyond my comprehension. The conversation is sometimes done in a local language, which reveals like jargon, the intimacy between interlocutors yet puts foreign readers out of the narrative sphere. Such a semantic “alienation” of outsiders is of course intentional to show how the European language does not always conquer the inner self of the colonized people and the elite Africans are positioned between the ex-colonizers' regime and the commoners' one.

In his opening remarks, Inaga Shigemi mentioned the problematic dichotomy between the East and the West as the starting point of this conference. Kaputu occupies himself in, so to speak, the “third space” from which the dichotomy could be re-considered. In this sense his paper and presentation was an indispensable part of our conference and we are grateful for his vital presence.